

1 Painting in the Year 2

History has too often been no more than a tale of the actions of wild beasts, among whom from time to time one makes out a hero; we are entitled to hope that we are beginning the history of mankind.

Mirabeau, 1789¹

Books about modernism tend to go in for inaugural dates. It all began in the 1820s, they say, or with Courbet setting up his booth outside the Exposition Universelle in 1855, or the year *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du Mal* were put on trial, or in room M of the Salon des Refusés. "An important component in historical sequences of artistic events," writes George Kubler,

is an abrupt change of content and expression at intervals when an entire language of form suddenly falls into disuse, being replaced by a new language of different components and an unfamiliar grammar. An example is the sudden transformation of occidental art and architecture about 1910. The fabric of society manifested no rupture, and the texture of useful inventions continued step by step in closely linked order, but the system of artistic invention was abruptly transformed, as if large numbers of men [*sic*] had suddenly become aware that the inherited repertory of forms no longer corresponded to the actual meaning of existence . . . In art the transformation was as if instantaneous, with the total configuration of what we now recognize as modern art coming all at once into being without many firm links to the preceding system of expression.²

My candidate for the beginning of modernism – which at least has the merit of being obviously far-fetched – is 25 Vendémiaire Year 2 (16 October 1793, as it came to be known). That was the day a hastily completed painting by Jacques-Louis David, of Marat, the martyred hero of the revolution – *Marat à son dernier soupir*, David called it early on³ – was released into the public realm (fig. 7).

A few minutes after midday on 25 Vendémiaire, Marie-Antoinette was guillotined. Michelet tells us that her death, so long demanded by Hébert and the Paris wards (the so-called *sections*), in the event went off quietly.⁴ People's minds were on other things – the scandal of Précy's escape from Lyon, for example, and the news, mostly bad, from the Army of the North. They knew a great battle was brewing. The cart carrying the queen to the scaffold may well have passed directly under the windows of David's apartment in the Palais du

7 Jacques-Louis David: *Death of Marat*, oil on canvas, 165 × 128, 1793 (Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels)

8 Jacques-Louis David:
*Marie-Antoinette on her
 Way to the Scaffold*,
 brown ink on paper, 14.8
 x 10.1, 1793 (Musée du
 Louvre, Paris)



Louvre; in any case we have a pen-and-ink drawing in David's hand of the queen in her final regalia, seemingly done on the spot (fig. 8). "Sinister jotting," its first owner called it.⁵ The queen died bravely. Her last fear was that her dead body would be torn limb from limb by the crowd. It did not happen.

A few hours later there was a second ceremony in the streets – some of them the same streets Marie-Antoinette had been wheeled along on her way from the Conciergerie to the place de la Révolution. The printed *Ordre de la Marche* for the afternoon's events survives, and we have one or two other reminiscences of the day's final setpiece in the Cour du Louvre. Albert Soboul, in his *Les Sans-Culottes parisiens en l'an deux*, puts together the following description of what happened:

On the afternoon of 16 October, the Museum section marched in procession along the quai de l'École, the rues de la Monnaie, Saint-Honoré, and Saint-Nicaise, then stopped in the place de la Réunion to burn the act of indictment against Marat [that is, a copy of the charges drawn up by the Girondins against Marat the previous April], marched on along the quai du Louvre as far as the rue des Poulies, and went into the great courtyard of the Louvre through the colonnade. At the head of the column were ten ranks of drums and riflemen marching in strict order, then a detachment of the armed forces; after them the popular societies with their standards, the sections "preceded by their banners," and various corporate bodies; a detachment of troops came next, flag and drums in the lead, then the whole Museum section passed by en masse; a "corps of musicians" ahead of a deputation from the Conven-

tion, and following them a group of young conscripts, oak branches in their hands, carrying in their midst the busts of Marat and Lepelletier [*sic*]; behind them the *citoyennes* of the section dressed all in white, holding their children by the hand and bearing flowers to deck Marat's tomb; and then bringing up the rear a detachment of the section's own armed forces. In the courtyard of the Louvre, sarcophagi had been erected, and on top of them pictures, painted by David, of the two martyrs of liberty [the other picture, of the regicide Michel Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, killed by a Royalist on the morning of the King's execution, no longer exists]; a funeral service was held in front of them, with hymns and speeches. As in the ceremonies of the Catholic church, all the arts contributed their magic to the exaltation of the faithful; the sans-culottes communed in the memory of their martyrs.⁶

It is not often that we know so much about the circumstances in which a painting was first shown to the public. But then, it is not often that the circumstances are so carefully stage-managed. No one can be sure that it was David himself who decided who went where that day carrying what. The *Ordre de la Marche* is signed, for form's sake, by the Museum section's president and secretary. But it would not be surprising if David were responsible. He was the Republic's great expert on matters of mass choreography. He was one of the section's most important Jacobins. And two days previously he had gone before the Convention to announce that the picture of Marat was completed, and to ask his colleagues, "before offering it you, to allow me to lend it to my fellow citizens of the Museum section, as well as that of Lepelletier [*sic*], so that both can be present, in some sense, at the civic honors paid them by their fellow citizens."⁷ Naturally the Conventionnels were not to be excluded from this special event. They could come see their pictures if they wanted to. Even march in the procession. "I invite you to be the first to come view them at my quarters in the Louvre, starting next Saturday."

The Convention seems to have agreed to David's proposal without much discussion. Among other things, it would probably have struck them as no bad thing for the afternoon of Marie-Antoinette's execution – she was appearing before the Revolutionary tribunal on the day David made his request – to have one or two rival attractions on offer.

I did say "among other things." By which I mean other possible purposes – other meanings and messages that may have been on the organizers' minds, and maybe even on the participants', as they let their pictures out in public or made their way toward the sarcophagi. I believe that David's procession belongs to its moment – to the days and weeks surrounding 25 Vendémiaire – in ways not necessarily written on the surface. And that the picture of Marat only truly makes sense if its belonging to the same moment is taken seriously, even at the risk of setting an empiricist historian's teeth terminally on edge. For of course the *Marat* was not done with the procession in view. The procession was thrown together in October. It was part of that month's specific politics. The painting had been under way since July. It had been ordered by the Convention, to be seen in situ by Conventionnels. And so it would be in due course – for a while behind the tribune in the Salle des séances, and later, when Marat's fortunes waned, somewhere in an outer office.

But it is never the case that we interest ourselves in the circumstances of a picture's first showing because we believe the picture was done for that showing. That showing could only have been imagined, or perhaps phantasized, by the painter as he or she was at work in the first place. And always inaccurately. David, I guess, never had the idea while he did the painting that eventually his *Marat* and *Le Peletier* would be "present, in some sense, at the

civic honors paid them by their fellow citizens." But the fact that they were, and that in the end he went to such lengths to dictate the terms of their inclusion in the event, tells us something about the nature of David's presuppositions as an artist – his active imagining of what he was doing painting Marat at all. Something decisive: that is my hunch. For my feeling is that what marks this moment of picture-making off from others (what makes it inaugural) is precisely the fact that contingency rules. Contingency enters the process of picturing. It invades it. There is no other substance out of which paintings can now be made – no givens, no matters and subject-matters, no forms, no usable pasts. Or none that a possible public could be taken to agree on anymore. And in painting – in art in general – disagreement most often means desuetude.

Modernism, as I have said, is the art of these new circumstances. It can revel in the contingency or mourn the desuetude. Sometimes it does both. But only that art can be called modernist that takes the one or other fact as determinant.

But what contingency, precisely? And entering the picture how?

Let me go back to the procession on 25 Vendémiaire. The first thing to say about it is that it was, at least on one level, profoundly ordinary. Events much like it had happened elsewhere in Paris in the preceding days, and many more were to come. The Sections de la Halle-au-Bled et de Guillaume Tell Réunies, for example, had gathered on 6 October *Pour l'inauguration des bustes de Brutus, Michel Lepelletier et Paul Marat, martyrs de la liberté, et la déclaration des droits de l'homme, gravée sur une pierre de la Bastille.*⁸ They published extracts from the speeches made that day. The Section de Piques was equally proud of the address *Prononcé à la Fête décernée . . . aux mânes de Marat et de Le Pelletier, par Sade, citoyen de cette section, et membre de la société populaire.* They brought it out in pamphlet form on 29 September. Citizen Sade, unsurprisingly, had things to say about Marat's murderer, Charlotte Corday:

Soft and timid sex, how can it be that delicate hands like yours have seized the dagger whetted by sedition? . . . Ah! your eagerness now to come throw flowers on the tomb of this true friend of the people makes us forget that Crime found a perpetrator among you. Marat's barbarous assassin, like one of those hybrid creatures to whom the very terms male and female are not applicable, vomited from the jaws of hell to the despair of both sexes, belongs directly to neither. Her memory must be forever shrouded in darkness; and above all let no one offer us her effigy, as some dare do, in the enchanting guise of Beauty. O too credulous artists – break this monster in pieces, trample her underfoot, disfigure her features, or only offer her to our revolted gaze pursued by Furies from the underworld.⁹

Presumably the speeches at a similar ceremony the week before, on 23 September, *Dans la Section des Gardes-Françoises, pour l'inauguration des bustes de Lepelletier et Marat*, had had less of a personal subtext. On 22 September the Section du Panthéon gathered to hear one Gavard – he seems to have made no other mark in history – deliver a funeral oration to Marat alone. And so on. These are only the occasions that left a written record behind them.¹⁰

The show put on by the Museum section was ordinary, then, in the sense of being one of a series. (I am not denying that individual items in the series are as far out of the ordinary as you could dream up. They look like figments of Goya's or Baudelaire's imagination. Year 2 is the nightmare from which all later sadists borrow their imagery.) The show was likewise ordinary in its language, its organization. If the procession of 25 Vendémiaire really followed the instructions set out in the *Ordre de la Marche* – and any militant worth his or her salt

knew things were likely to be a bit ragged on the afternoon – then even an unsympathetic spectator would have been impressed, at least by an imagery of force. The People marched through the streets to the Louvre. At the heart of the procession, and by the look of things its single biggest element, was the rank and file of the Museum section, passing by “en masse, unarmed.” But the mass was padded and sandwiched by *corps constitués* of all sorts: delegations from Piques and Panthéon and Guillaume Tell, clubs and popular societies lined up beneath their insignia, representatives of the courts and offices of the Revolutionary government, those Conventionnels who had accepted David’s invitation of two days before, women in white leading their children. Conscripts carrying the busts of the martyrs “with the respect inspired by Virtue in those who have vowed to vanquish for the fatherland or die.”¹¹ Marching bands, drums and more drums, and everywhere – at the head of the column, in the middle, making up the rear – *détachements de la force armée*. Nothing is accidental here. Everything is in its proper political and natural place. When the column stopped in the place de la Réunion to set fire to the Girondins’ act of accusation against Marat, the crowds were meant to remember the Girondin deputies then awaiting trial in the Conciergerie, and harden their hearts. The trial began a week later. Brissot, Vergniaud and the rest were executed the week following, on 10 Brumaire.

It is a pity, given the amount of detail surviving, that more was not said by contemporaries about how the Marat and Le Peletier paintings were set up at the end of the route. On two sarcophagi, this much is certain. Under some kind of temporary covering. One witness from the early nineteenth century recalls it as a “mortuary chapel.”¹² Another talks of the paintings being put “in a kind of funeral crypt, where they were admired over the course of six weeks.”¹³ Perhaps (here historians start extrapolating from other such floats and festival scenery, of which there were many at the time) they were put inside a halfshell of branches and tricolor drapery. That would agree with David’s aesthetic.

Apparently there were four lines of verse by David’s friend Gabriel Bouquier pinned to the sarcophagus:

Peuple, Marat est mort; l’amant de la Patrie,
Ton ami, ton soutien, l’espoir de l’affligé
Est tombé sous les coups d’une honte flétrie.
Pleure! Mais souviens-toi qu’il doit être vengé.

(People, Marat is dead; the lover of the Fatherland,/Your friend, your supporter, the hope of the afflicted/Has fallen under the blows of blighted infamy./Weep! But remember that he must be avenged.)¹⁴

We shall find Bouquier’s basic moves here – his terms of address and instruction to the viewer, and above all his sense of who the viewer was – repeated a hundred times in the following months.

Many of the individual bits and pieces of information about 25 Vendémiaire are vivid, not to say tear-jerking, yet I am still left wondering what the whole occasion was meant to do. Whose occasion was it? Why did David and others think it worth investing their energies in, when so much else demanded their attention? What did they take it to signify?

Soboul, who had his reasons for wanting to believe that a new actor, the *menu peuple* of Paris, had stepped onto the world-historical stage in Year 2, treated the procession we have been looking at as one of the year’s great moments of class self-discovery. If he had known of the verses stuck to the

sarcophagus he would have quoted them with relish. "Les sans-culottes communiaient dans le souvenir de leurs martyrs." The body and blood they partook of in the Cour du Louvre, so Soboul believed, was essentially their own. Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden. David's asking permission to show off the *Marat* and *Le Peletier* to his fellow *sectionnaires* was interpreted in a similarly exalted vein. "Art was no longer reserved for a privileged minority."¹⁵

I suppose I am more inclined than most to take Soboul's hypothesis seriously. Something was being played out in summer and fall 1793, in and around the strange cult of Marat, which no one historical actor was able to control completely – not the Jacobins, not the Hébertists, not the followers of poor Jacques Roux and Claire Lacombe, not the militants in the Cordeliers or the *sectionnaires* with their banners, not David, not Robespierre, not Citizen Sade. I shall speak to this lack of control in a moment. But for the time being, let me just point out that Soboul himself, in his bran-tub of a book, gives us the clue that I think casts doubt on his best-case interpretation.

The day after the procession, he reports, the Société sectionnaire du Muséum – that is, the hard core of popular activists who ran the section as a political entity – solicited for affiliation to the Jacobin Club. Their spokesman seemed to know what metaphors would do the trick. "The republicans making up the popular society of the Museum section come to ask their mother for the sustenance necessary for their patriotism to grow. Could a tender mother rebuff a virtuous child? You are the mother society of all in the Republic. Add to your family by adopting us."¹⁶ The section's wish was granted; though not, as the Jacobin newspaper assured its readers the next day, until after the membership had undergone "the most rigid examination." For had not the Jacobins decided, three weeks before, that they would recognize as true popular societies "only those where the revolutionary committee, first having purged its ranks, now formed the society's core, and where all members had had to pass a vote of this same committee on their credentials"?¹⁷ Soboul may be right in saying that the very severity of this party diktat produced a backlash from the societies themselves. Certainly we have instances of some of them asking for affiliation, being declared not pure enough, and going their separate ways (for as long as the Terror let them). But not the Museum section: that is the point. They were the purest of the pure. It is my guess that the whole episode of 26 Vendémiaire, in fact – milky metaphors and all – was meant as a kind of template for other such bindings and purgings to come.

So are we entitled to look back on the procession of 25 Vendémiaire with what happened the next day in mind? Not necessarily. Sometimes in history strings are really not being pulled behind the scenes. Revolutions are untidy. Coincidences do happen. Politicians have more important things to worry about than pictures and hymns.

But David *was* a politician. My hunch is that the afternoon's events had been conceived, and orchestrated, as a kind of proof of the Museum section's orthodoxy. Popular festivity – the sans-culottes "communing in the memory of their martyrs" – was under control. It had got itself the requisite stiffening. Especially of armed force.

Or maybe we should say that the procession was a kind of reward, from the party, for a purge which had already taken place. "Rigid examinations," after all, are not performed on the spur of the moment in the body of the hall. What the Museum section was, or had made itself, was no doubt known to the players that mattered long before anyone turned up at the assembly point on 25 Vendémiaire. Maybe this is why the Conventionnels allowed their pictures out in the first place.

Historians agree that September 1793 was a turning point in the Jacobins' relations with the sans-culottes. (What is meant by the final, hyphenated word here will emerge gradually, I hope, as the chapter proceeds. For now just take it to indicate, or claim to indicate, the Parisian masses.) Even François Furet, who is more sceptical than most of an account of revolutionary politics impelled by class tension, sees September as "probably the crucial period in the formation of the Revolutionary government." His reasons have a Soboulian ring to them. "The Mountain had needed the sans-culottes to defeat the Gironde in the spring of 1793, and wished to keep them as allies but without giving up any important powers."¹⁸ That proved difficult. A summer of agitation in the streets and clubs culminated, on 3 September, with the sections' armed forces surrounding the Convention, demanding the setting up of an *armée révolutionnaire* for use against the Republic's enemies at home, a purge of the Committees of Public Safety and General Security, and mass arrests.

Furet's phrase is a trifle bland: "The Convention gave ground but retained control over events." On 5 September it agreed that Terror was now "the order of the day." On 9 September it set up the *armée révolutionnaire*. Two days later it fixed maximum prices for grain and flour. Another fortnight and the maximum was extended, at least in theory, to wages and prices for all commodities. (This is one of the reasons why associating the Terror with a not-yet-born socialism is so tempting.) It put the Revolutionary tribunal on a war footing on the fourteenth, passed the Law of Suspects on the seventeenth, told local revolutionary committees to draw up lists of the revolution's enemies. And immediately it turned its new weapons against the most dangerous representatives of those who had asked for them in the first place. The grass-roots activist Jacques Roux, who had made trouble for the Jacobins throughout the year, was finally imprisoned the very day the armed sections ringed the Tuileries.¹⁹ Other so-called *enragés* followed. Their newspapers sputtered into silence. On 9 September the Convention agreed to pay a small wage to needy citizens for attendance at their *assemblées sectionales*, but only if the sections gave up their habit of meeting daily (and monitoring the Convention's doings). Twice a week, or better still, twice every ten days, would be sufficient.²⁰ It was the beginning of a whole series of moves by the Jacobins that hemmed in, and eventually put an end to, the sections as an independent force. This is the context in which the events of 26 Vendémiaire should be understood. September is the month, I think, when David took the key decisions in his painting of Marat.

I realize I have rubbed my reader's nose in the detail of politics in 1793. And that is as it should be. My claim, you remember, is that the detail of politics is what David's *Marat* is made out of.

Politics, I should say, is the form par excellence of the contingency that makes modernism what it is. This is why those who wish modernism had never happened (and not a few who think they are firmly on its side) resist to the death the idea that art, at many of its highest moments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, took the stuff of politics as its material and did not transmute it. I think of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People*, of Courbet in 1850 and Manet in 1867, of Morris, Ensor, and Menzel, of *Pressa* and *Guernica*, of Rude's *Marseillaise* and Saint-Gaudens's *Shaw Memorial*, of *Medals for Dishonor*, *Monument to the Third International*, Berlin and Vitebsk, Cologne and Guadalajara. No one but a fool, of course, would deny that politics provided the occasion for art in some or all of these cases. The disagreement turns on the words "occasion" and "material," and

especially on the claim that in some strong sense modernist art not only is obliged to make form *out of* politics, but also to leave the accident and tendentiousness of politics in the form it makes – not to transmute it, in other words. (Otherwise the claim is harmless. For we know full well that Rubens and Velázquez operated as a matter of course with materials that had politics grossly inscribed in them. The *Surrender at Breda*, the *Triumphs of Marie de Medici*. Painters were providers of political services. But of a special, duly allotted kind – there is the difference from modernism. The service they performed was to transmute the political, to clean it of the dross of contingency, to raise it up to the realm of allegory, or – subtler performance for deeper sophisticates – to make its very everydayness quietly miraculous. *Surrender at Breda* equals *Entry into Jerusalem*.)

I am not saying that an effort at raising and transfiguring simply ceased on or about Vendémiaire Year 2. The effort, we shall see, is still palpable in David's *Marat*. And in the *Raft* and the *Liberty*. I dare say all three artists would have been happy with the idea of themselves as a new Velázquez. But I believe that in practice they were not able to be any such thing, and that their pictures' articulation of that impossibility is what makes them unprecedented in the history of art. Modernism turns on the impossibility of transcendence.

This last is a simple, not to say obvious, idea which you would have thought anyone interested in the texture of modernity would find it easy to accept. But that would be to underestimate the doubleness of the term "modernism" in the proposition. Modernism is Art. And Art, or a certain cult of Art, is exactly the site (for some) on which the impossibility of transcendence can be denied. Perhaps it is the one site we have left. So defend it by any means necessary.

Modernism's brokenness and ruthlessness, say its enemies, are willed, forced, and ultimately futile. We may even have escaped from them at last. Modernism's extremity, say its false friends, is just surface appearance, beneath which the real matter of art – not just the delights of manufacture, but what those delights have always given onto, moments of vision, here-and-now totalities, a whole usable past – is kept in being, no doubt against the odds. When I say "false friends" it is not that I doubt the passion of their defense, or even that its rhetoric corresponds to much that modernists said of themselves. But modernism, we shall see, is a process that deeply misrecognizes its own nature for much of the time. How could it not be? It is *Art*. And for Art to abandon what Art most intensely had been, and nonetheless to proceed, nonetheless to go on imagining the world otherwise – just otherwise, not epitomized or complete – is not likely to happen without all kinds of reaction-formation on the part of artists.

The case remains to be proven, I know. And the verdict is not meant to apply across the board. I am not saying anything as sweeping as that "modernism – all or any modernism – is political," or trying idiotically to demote the careers of (among others) Corot, Monet, and Matisse. My argument is that the engagement of modernism with politics at certain moments tells us something about its coming to terms with the world's disenchantment in general. Corot, Monet, and Matisse had their own ways of dealing with the same situation. I should say that they recognized the world's disenchantment in terms (with a sense of what was at stake) that put them alongside Courbet, Manet, and Malevich – as opposed to Théodore Rousseau, Renoir, and Derain, for

example, to choose difficult points of comparison. The fact that their art had nothing to say about the Dreyfus affair, or that Madame Matisse decided not to disturb her husband's dreamworld by telling him she was working for the Resistance, is not apropos. There are dreamworlds and dreamworlds. Anyone not capable of seeing that Matisse's tells us more than anyone else's in the last hundred years about what dreaming has become had better give up on modernism right away.

I have to show what I mean, then, by saying that David's *Marat* "turns on the impossibility of transcendence" and shows us politics as the form of a world.

On 28 July 1793, a Sunday, there was a ceremony having to do with Marat in the Club des Cordeliers – at that moment the other great center of Jacobin politics besides the *société-mère* itself. A series of orators stood before a small altar erected to Marat's sacred heart. Marat had used the Cordeliers as a base for his political operations, and the altar contained the very relic, extracted from his body just a fortnight before. The murder had taken place on 13 July.

Later writers about David's picture have been fond of making the comparison between it and a Pietà. Sometimes they seem to think the comparison disposes of the case. And there is nothing new to the linkage, or to the ideological work the linkage is meant to do: that is, to save Marat from a realm where what he was, and what he meant, remains an open question. The main speechmaker on 28 July had this to say (I have combined two accounts of the occasion, from rather different kinds of witness):

O thou Jesus, o thou Marat! O sacred heart of Jesus, o sacred heart of Marat, you are both equally deserving of our homage . . . Let us compare the Son of Mary's works to those of the friend of the People: as I see it, the apostles are the Jacobins and the Cordeliers, the Publicans are the shopkeepers, and the Pharisees are the aristocrats. Jesus, in a word, was a prophet. But Marat is a god.

Like Jesus, Marat loves the people and no one but them. Like Jesus, Marat detests the nobles and the priests, the rich and the swindlers. Like Jesus, he never stops fighting those plagues of society. Like Jesus, he led a pure and frugal life [a point, we shall see, which David's picture goes to extraordinary lengths to emphasize]. Like Jesus, Marat was extremely tender-hearted and humane [ditto] . . .²¹

Presumably the orator thought he was on safe ground. But he was wrong. Almost immediately he ran into trouble with part of his audience, including some of Marat's most dedicated supporters. A sans-culotte called Brochet for one, who had just reported to the club on his efforts to find a suitable container for the sacred heart (it was eventually hung from the ceiling in a sort of vial), appears as follows in notes taken on the occasion:

Brochet, after paying homage to the orator's great talents, finds fault with the parallel he drew: Marat, he says, is not to be compared with Jesus of Nazareth; that man, turned into God by priests, sowed the seeds of superstition on earth, he defended Kings. Marat on the contrary fought against fanaticism and declared war on the throne. Let's hear no more talk of this Jesus! Brochet shouted. [In another account: There ought never to be any talk of this Jesus – it's all foolishness. The seeds of fanaticism and all such fiddle-faddle have disfigured Liberty ever since she was born (*Des germes de fanatisme et toutes ces fadaïses ont mutilé la Liberté dès son berceau*).]

Philosophy – yes, nothing but philosophy! – should be the Republicans' guiding star. They shall have no other God but Liberty!²²

Supposing David had been in the audience on 28 July (which is not improbable), whose side would he have been on? Or to put it less crudely, to what extent did the disagreement between Brochet and the orator – that is, the possibility of such a disagreement, even among those who thought Marat a good thing – inform the making of Marat's picture in the weeks that followed? Given that everybody agrees that some kind of analogy between Christ and Marat was intended on 25 Vendémiaire – by both the picture and the whole set-up in the Cour du Louvre – then what kind? And could the picture actually make the analogy – I mean make it stick, make it plausible even to viewers like Brochet?

To begin to answer these kinds of questions we have to try to reconstruct what the exchange in the Cordeliers was about. What was at stake in it? I talked of David possibly ending up on Brochet's or the orator's side. But whose sides were they, ultimately? In what sort of battle?

Very little in 1793 is simple. Brochet, for example, is typically hard to pin down. We know he was linked to François Vincent, the leading light of the Cordeliers at this moment, and perhaps later to Hébert and his newspaper, the *Père Duchesne*. He may have paid for the association. Richard Cobb says he was condemned to death on 12 Germinal, as part of the Jacobins' settling of accounts with the Hébertists. Soboul has him surviving into the Year 3, only to be arrested as a "terrorist" on 25 Frimaire.²³

Even if we knew for certain how Brochet ended up, that would still not let us assign him any cut-and-dried political position – let alone class-political position – in the chaos of summer and fall 1793. He seems to have been at times a kind of honest broker, or maybe frontman, between the Cordeliers and the Jacobins. It was Brochet I quoted previously as insisting in the Club des Jacobins on 23 September that the popular societies purge themselves before being bound closer to the Party; Brochet who acted as a moderating influence within his own Section Marat, bringing in a better class of artisan and small shopkeeper to sit on the *comité révolutionnaire*²⁴; Brochet who was put up as figurehead president of the Cordeliers once the club had been marginalized.²⁵ And so on.

Brochet's is a representative voice, in other words; representative in its very uncertainty about where the revolution was. His being sure in July that Marat – the figure and memory of Marat – had to be at the center of revolutionary self-definition is nothing special. Everyone from Saint-Just to Jacques Roux chimed in with that, at least for a while. Nor is his being so vehement about the precise terms in which the self-definition had to be done – *these terms, my terms* (Marat's terms), not yours. If Saint-Just and Jacques Roux had been in the room together, they would have fallen to arguing in much the same way.

Marat was a martyr of liberty. He was the people's friend. "In the state of war we are in, it is only the people – the little people, the people so scorned and so little deserving of scorn – who are capable of imposing [liberty] on the enemies of the revolution. Only the people can make them do their duty, force them into silence, reduce them to that state of salutary terror so indispensable if the great work of the constitution is to be consummated [and] the State organized wisely . . ." Marat had been a constant enemy of the *accapareurs*,

the *agiotteurs*, the *ouvriers de luxe* (among whom he numbered artists). That is, of monopolists and speculators, and the culture they spawned. "The people lack everything in their fight against the upper classes who oppress them [*Tout manque au peuple contre les classes élevées qui l'oppriment*]." ²⁷ Ever since 1789 he had argued that sooner or later the revolution would stand in need of violence to survive. Sometimes he can be found arguing this almost on physical-scientific grounds (before the revolution he had practiced medicine in London and written books against materialism): "It is with our Revolution as with a crystalline solution that is agitated by shaking it violently: at the beginning all the crystals scattered through the liquid are set in motion, dispersing and mingling at random, then they move with less vivacity, by degrees they draw closer together, and in the end they take up their original combination again . . ." ²⁸ Only a series of new shocks would prevent the social mixture from hardening once and for all. "It is by violence that liberty must be established, and the moment is come" – this one (of many) is in April 1793 – "to organize momentarily the despotism of liberty so as to crush the despotism of kings." The French here is especially chilling: "C'est par la violence qu'on doit établir la liberté, et le moment est venu d'organiser momentanément le despotisme de la liberté pour écraser le despotisme des rois." ²⁹

Of course there is much in this that would likely appeal to the Jacobins as they stood on the verge of Terror. Marat had often been of their party in the disputes of the previous months. When the Girondins had asked for his arrest in early April, David himself had rushed to the tribune shouting: "I demand that you put me to death, I too am a virtuous man . . . Liberty will triumph." ³⁰ By the time of his death Marat was largely reconciled with the emerging powers. Michelet has a sardonic subheading for June 1793: "Robespierre and Marat, guardians of order."

But look again at the phrases from *L'Ami du Peuple* quoted above. Their content, and above all their rhetorical temperature, are typical of Marat's journalism. And these are enough to suggest that, reconciled or not, Marat promised to go on being a mixed blessing for Revolutionary government – certainly for governors of Robespierre's vision and personal style. It was not just Marat's habit of adopting the wildest and bloodiest form of words, even when what he was recommending was a fairly ordinary extension of the state's monopoly of force. (Let us not call it a War Cabinet or an Emergency Powers Act, let us call it a despotism of liberty.) Nor was it merely that he stood in the minds of the Jacobins' enemies as a symbol of everything the Jacobins were but did not dare declare themselves. (The Girondins had far from given up on Marat after the failure of their April campaign against him. He was the monster who had given the signal for the September Massacres. Blood was still on his head. Charlotte Corday was part of a Girondin circle in Caen where such talk was commonplace.) It was also that Marat's unswerving identification with the *petit peuple* of Paris – one-sided as the identification may have been, since his links with the popular clubs and societies were tenuous – led him time and again to give voice to positions on the "social question" that all other parties agreed were beyond the pale.

In 1791, for example, he had been more or less alone in opposing the *lois Le Chapelier* which put an end to workers' associations; not that he disapproved of removing obstacles to free trade – that would have been to reimagine his whole *philosophe* inheritance from the ground up, which certainly he was incapable of doing – but that he thought preventing workers from gathering to discuss their interests was, in a time of trouble, one more way of depriving the revolution of support. ³¹ And this is the typical trajectory of Marat's politics. A terrible determination to forge or preserve those weapons that (in his opinion)

the revolution might need combines with a wish to speak for the despised and rejected. No one is claiming that the combination led to a specific or consistent politics, or to one that put him usually at odds with the Jacobins. A lot of the time in 1793 it is more a question of his seeming to push the Jacobins to do what was necessary to annihilate their enemies, even if – maybe in Marat's case, especially if – the enemies also claimed to be speaking in the *petit peuple's* name. Marat called early on for an end to Jacques Roux and the *enragés*.³² But here too the logic of Terror led back to the same set of insoluble class paradoxes. The *enragés* must be destroyed because they are a faction. The revolution has no room for factions because it is one and indivisible. Because its great terms are Nation and People, singular and sovereign. But if the People is singular and sovereign, then does that mean that those who actually make up the majority of its members *are* the People – for some reason as yet not properly represented? And could there be such a representation without the whole current panoply of the state – the necessary armor of the revolution in difficulties – being thrown into the melting pot? No answers to these questions emerged in Year 2. The questions themselves were raised only dimly and fitfully. But at least Marat's writing seems to have impelled him toward the point where, in however garbled and pseudo-ferocious a form, the questions came up.

Marat was close to the Jacobins, then. In my view he was distinct from them – the image of politics he stood for exceeded Robespierre's and David's in crucial ways – and it should not come as a surprise that after his murder, plenty of people thought the time had come to make the distinction absolute. The *enragés*, for a start: three days after Marat's assassination, on 16 July, Jacques Roux published issue 243 of Marat's newspaper, *Le Publiciste de la république française par l'ombre de Marat, l'ami du Peuple*. What gave him the right to do so, he claimed, was the hatred he had earned “of the royalists, the federalists, the egoists, the moderates, the hoarders, the monopolists, the speculators, the intriguers, the traitors and bloodsuckers of the people”³³ – the more comprehensive the list, the better his title to Marat's legacy. (Unlike the people in power, was the implication, who had discovered that moderates and monopolists have their uses.) Another *enragé*, Théophile Leclerc, followed suit with a new run of *L'Ami du Peuple* in summer and early fall. Hébert, in the *Père Duchesne*, rushed to assure his readers that no change of masthead was necessary: the mantle of Marat fell on him.

These signs need not necessarily have amounted to much. They could have been a version of the usual jockeying for position after a leader dies, especially if he or she dies in harness – part of the spume of politics, in other words, with no very deep or permanent interests in play. But I do not think they were. Two things argue otherwise. First, there is the elaborateness of the Jacobins' efforts to counter the *enragés'* bid for ownership, and make Marat their totem. And second, the fact that Marat's shadow kept spreading and transmuting in late summer, in ways that clearly exceeded any one party's or interest's doing. There was a cult of Marat in Year 2. Soboul is not alone in thinking it had, for a while, the first glimmerings of true religiosity about it. It was a cult in the strong sense, then – the French (or Durkheimian) sense. People gathering, that is, to give form to their collective will. And investing their fears and hopes in a single figure, like and unlike themselves.

Let me begin my description of this process with what the Jacobins did. Obviously no very clear line can be drawn between Party instigation (or effort

at containment) and pressure from below. I think the Jacobins were often trying to draw some such line, and failing. Maybe they were on 25 Vendémiaire. Equally, the scene at the end of July in the Cordeliers had some of the hallmarks of an official occasion. The orator may well have thought he was speaking a Jacobin script, or one they would approve of. But that does not mean we are entitled to take Brochet as delivering the *enragés'* lines, or Hébert's. Maybe he was. More likely he thought he was right at the revolution's center. It was one thing to go shopping, as he had done the day before, for an urn to contain Marat's sacred heart, and another to glory in the analogy between the new cults and those they were supposed to displace. "Philosophy – yes, nothing but philosophy! – should be the Republican's guide." What would Robespierre find to disagree with in that?

The Jacobins found themselves negotiating with too many things – too many interests and energies – calling themselves Marat. This is part of the tension that makes David's picture so spellbinding. But it does not follow that anyone's Marat was grist to the Jacobin mill. Lines got drawn, quickly and brutally. Robespierre brought Marat's widow, Simone Evrard, before the bar of the Convention on 8 August, and had her specifically denounce Jacques Roux and Théophile Leclerc – "scoundrelly writers . . . who claim to continue his journals and make his spirit speak, in order to outrage his memory and lead the people astray."¹⁴ "Now that he is dead, they are trying to perpetuate the parricidal calumny which made him out to be a crazed apostle of disorder and anarchy."¹⁵ On 22 August Jacques Roux was arrested for the first time. On 5 September he was jailed for good. Leclerc disappears from the historical record as the fall proceeds. He had seen the writing on the wall. Hébert was soon fighting unsuccessfully for his life.

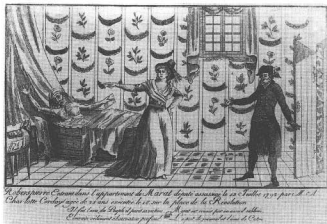
Marat was too important and volatile a political sign, then, to share with one's enemies; especially those who wanted his ghost to do little more than repeat the question he had asked in June, and by implication often before: "What have they *gained* from the Revolution?" – "they" being the People, naturally.¹⁶ But the question would not be robbed of its edge simply by pretending Marat had never asked it, or exterminating those who said he had. Marat must go on asking the question, with his characteristic vehemence, but giving it a Jacobin answer. The category "People" had to have something be its sign. Among the signifying possibilities on offer in 1793, "Marat" seemed one of the best. At least in him the category was personified. That might mean that the welter of claims, identifications, and resentments wrapped up in the word could at least be concentrated into a single figure – and therefore shaped and contained. It would take some doing.

Of course I am not saying that Robespierre and his henchmen sat down one day in August and worked all this out. – "Job for you, Citizen David." Nobody knew what was going to happen next in the summer of 1793. Forward planning was a mug's game. But equally, I do think that David's painting a picture of Marat in August and September was steeped in – informed by – the battle over Marat's legacy. Otherwise I would not have bothered to describe it in such detail. What marks my account off from conspiracy theory is not so much an *a priori* judgement that history does not work like that – too much of the time it does – as a feeling that in this case, with these materials, no such computing of advantage was possible. I make a distinction, in other words, between the sort of manipulation I think was behind the procession on 25

Vendémiaire (and its connection with the purge of the section next day) and the more extended, more intuitive Jacobin effort to have Marat signify in their terms. It is David's effort in particular that concerns me, but also the wider Jacobin negotiation with the Marat cult. And most of all, the implication of David's painting in the negotiation. Soboul is right. The situation is out of control. Surely never before had the powers-that-be in a state been obliged to improvise a sign language whose very effectiveness depended on its seeming to the People a language they had made up, and that therefore represented their interests. (It is the combination of democracy and headlong improvisation, and the pretense by leaders that they are truly ventriloquizing their subjects' thoughts and desires, that mark Robespierre's Paris off from Pericles's Athens.) No doubt it is easy to say in retrospect that the new language did nothing of the sort. But that is not the point. What matters to the historical imagination, at least in the first instance, is how the actors – especially the Jacobins – saw things. I conceive them as wavering hopelessly between conspiracy and self-deception, between calculus of effects and belief in their own symbols. No one more hopelessly (therefore productively) than David.

The question I posed a few pages back was: Supposing David had been present in the Cordeliers, would he have been on Brochet's or the orator's side? And what would he have taken the argument between them to be about, essentially? Representing whose interests?

At least by now we have established what stands in the way of a cut-and-dried answer to any of the above. But the David I imagine is not discouraged by his inability to give an answer – more likely galvanized by the fact. It is the uncertainty of level in the debate that is its chief fascination, and makes him most want to join in. He knew that picturing Marat was a political matter, part of a process of "freezing" the revolution (Saint-Just's unforgettable metaphor) and making it Jacobin property. He was aware of the steps Robespierre had taken to hurry the process on, and why the steps had been necessary. He would

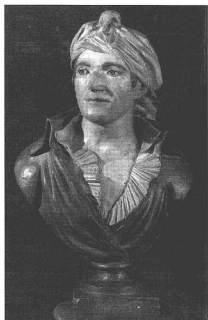


9 Anonymous:
Robespierre Entering
Marat's Apartment,
engraving, 1793 (Musée
Carnavalet, Paris)



10 Anonymous: *Obelisk with Cameos of Le Peletier and Marat*, wood and gilt, 39.5 high, 1793 (Private collection)

be on the lookout for danger signals. But of course he took the evening's rhetoric at face value. He believed that a new world was under construction. No doubt he saw in the cult of Marat the first forms of a liturgy and ritual in which the truths of the revolution itself would be made flesh – People, Nation, Virtue, Reason, Liberty. How could he not have thrilled, as the summer and fall went on, to the glamorous details of Marat's deification? News of twenty-nine towns and villages calling themselves after the martyred saint.³⁷ Of Marat becoming a favorite anti-Christian name for newborn babies. Of church after church, in Brumaire and Frimaire especially, taking down the crucifix and Virgin and putting up Marat and Le Peletier in their place – one historian counts fifty such ceremonies in Paris alone.³⁸ "That the building previously serving as a church become a hall for sessions of the *société populaire*, and in consequence, that busts of Marat and Le Peletier be put in place of statues of Saint Peter and Saint Denis, its one-time patron saints, and that the village of Mennecy-Villeroi henceforth be named Mennecy-Marat."³⁹ Of processions and speeches and apotheoses, many of them – particularly in August – with much less of a stage-managed look than the one David would be involved in. Of women going in for "hairdos à la Marat."⁴⁰ Of Montmarat replacing Montmartre. Of *déchristianisateurs* perfecting a suitably modernized sign of the cross, to be accompanied by the impeccable murmur, "Le Peletier, Marat, la Liberté ou la Mort."⁴¹ Of prints and broadsides and terra-cotta shrines for sans-culottes' mantelpieces (figs. 9 and 10). Of militants on 11 October, just five days before the Museum procession, dragging the portraits of kings and princes out of the



11 (above left) Anonymous: *Marat*, painted plaster, 1793 (Musée Carnavalet, Paris)



12 (above right) Anonymous: *Plagues of Egypt*, plate 9, engraving, whole sheet 24.6 × 29.4, 1794 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

Palais du Fontainebleau and burning them in front of Marat's image (figs. 11 and 12). Smoke from the portrait of Louis XIII by Philippe de Champaigne, it was said, "was wafted toward the bust. It was the most agreeable incense we could offer."⁴²

These details, as I say, are glamorous; and perhaps for that reason misleading. There is a quality of farce or factitiousness to many of them, and time and again one is on the verge of dismissing the lot (as Richard Cobb did, for instance) as a series of ludicrous or vengeful stunts, which cut no ice with ordinary men and women. And then one comes across the report of a ceremony, or a petition from a village, or a phrase or two from a *sectionnaire's* speech, which is suddenly free of the standard forms or the activists' overkill, and in which one thinks one overhears the struggles – maybe the ludicrous struggles – of a new religion being born. There are many other Brochets taking part in the process. Even the crowd outside the Palais du Fontainebleau deserves to figure in the record as more than a mob of peasant dupes egged on by a handful of vandal/professionals. Who are we to say what it must have been like to see the pompous encampment in the forest at last getting its come-uppance? What group of men and women had more of a right to pre-echo Walter Benjamin's: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Barbarism had been their daily bread. Maybe it took a burning Philippe de Champaigne to convince them it need not be any longer.

The more one looks at the cult of Marat, the less clear it becomes what kind of phenomenon one is studying. Which history is it part of? Of popular religion or state-formation? Of improvisation by the *menu peuple* or manipulation by

elites? The question applies to the episode of de-Christianization as a whole. And the answer obviously is both. The cult of Marat exists at the intersection between short-term political contingency and long-term disenchantment of the world. Maybe in its latter guise it often looks like a rear-guard action against the loss of the sacred. But here too its forms were unstable and ambivalent. We know of orators staging the Jesus-Marat comparison in 1793 so as to prove that the priests had captured and neutralized "Jesus the sans-culotte" by pretending he was something more than a man.⁴³ Or others (besides Brochet) making the comparison to Jesus Christ's disadvantage.⁴⁴ We know that even in the best-managed section – even in August – things could happen which reminded all concerned that the cult's basic premise was far from secure:

It is only too true that there were discovered, in the general assembly of the Butte-des-Moulins section [the voice here is that of the *sectionnaires* themselves, responding to an accusation from their neighbors at Arcis], citizens so villainous and perverse as to applaud the murder of Marat, incorruptible Friend of the People. Much the greater part of the assembly was seized with indignation at the occurrence and, to do it justice, decided that the appalling fact should be recorded in the minutes, and . . . reported to the public prosecutor of the revolutionary Tribunal so that he could uncover the perpetrators and punish them . . . Many citizens who had been led astray by intrigue – real anarchists, as you say – now acknowledge their errors. That testifies to the purity of our intentions.⁴⁵

Is it any wonder that Robespierre finally drew back from the whole farrago with a shiver of disgust? Was not trying to make a saint out of Marat, of all people, ultimately playing into one's enemies' hands? Had not the process led – I mean the whole mad, exalted search for a religion of the revolution – to the bishop of Paris, no less, being brought to the bar of the Convention on 17 Brumaire and solemnly abjuring his faith? And three days later to the scandalous (marvelous) Fête de la Raison in Notre-Dame? News was coming in of the *armées révolutionnaires* in the countryside, making bonfires of statues and riding priests out of town on a rail.

By what right did men who till now had counted for nothing in the course of the Revolution look round, in the midst of these events, for ways . . . to lure even good patriots into false measures, and sow confusion and discord in our ranks? By what right did they threaten freedom of worship in the name of freedom, and battle fanaticism with fanaticism of a new kind! What gave them the right to pervert the solemn homage paid to Truth in all its purity, and make it an everlasting laughing-stock! Why did we let them dally in this way with the people's dignity, and tie jester's bells onto the very scepter of philosophy?⁴⁶

Atheism is *aristocratic*, says Robespierre. Even that argument was not enough to put an end to de-Christianization straight away. Still less to the cult of Marat. As late as 25 Floréal (14 May 1794, two months or so before Robespierre's fall) the Section Marat can be found asking the Committees of Public Safety and General Security's permission to march through Paris in honor of its patron, drums playing, choirs singing, three of its daughters dressed as Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. The committees were unimpressed.

They are far from considering this project worthy of so great an object, or likely to realize it satisfactorily. They consider the idea of the three divinities represented by three women as contrary to the principles that the French people have just proclaimed by way of the Convention [that is, Robespierre's Cult of the Supreme Being], and against all notions of good sense.

An order banning the procession was issued on 3 Prairial.⁴⁷ A month or so before, a police spy had picked up the whisper: "If Marat was still alive at this moment, he would have been indicted and maybe guillotined."⁴⁸

This is to leap forward too far. For the purpose of understanding David's picture, what matters is August and September, and the relation of the Jacobins in those months to the popular movement they had helped bring into being. Outright suppression of the cult of Marat – and of many other demands and images dear to the militants and the *menu peuple* – was not possible, and doubtless not wanted (yet) by Robespierre and co. They thought they could ride the whirlwind. And part of the riding would be to take the demands and images, even those (particularly those) most open to day-to-day political distortion, and give them Jacobin form. If that could be done with the maximum price, for example (which had its origins in pure workshop resentment), then certainly it could be done with Marat. For Marat was their own man, essentially. He needed only be rid of the veils and shadows cast on him by the revolution's enemies. "Give us back Marat whole [*Redonne-nous Marat tout entier*]," as Audouin shouted to David in the Convention.⁴⁹

On one level I think Audouin and David would have understood that request quite literally. We know that David had originally planned, in the wild days following Marat's assassination, to stage a kind of tableau vivant using the martyr's embalmed body, showing him in the attitude struck at the moment of death. What had stood in the way of doing so was the body. It was not entire in the first place.

On the evening of Marat's death, the Jacobin Society sent us, Maure and myself [the speaker is David, to the Convention on 15 July], to gather news about him. I found him in an attitude that struck me deeply. He had a block of wood next to him, on which were placed paper and ink, and his hand, sticking out of the bathtub, was writing his last thoughts for the salvation of the people. Yesterday, the surgeon who embalmed his corpse sent to ask me how we should display it to the people in the church of the Cordeliers. Some parts of his body could not be uncovered, for you know he suffered from leprosy and his blood was inflamed. But I thought it would be interesting to offer him in the attitude I first found him in, "writing for the happiness of the people."⁵⁰

I get the feeling the embalmer was already trying to talk David down from his first idea of a scene straight out of the morgue; but David was nothing if not stubborn (as well as impressionable) and it was not till next day, after consulting with *sectionnaires* from Théâtre-Français, that he admitted defeat. "It has been decided that his body be put on show covered with a damp sheet, which will represent the bathtub, and which, sprinkled with water from time to time, will prevent the effects of putrefaction."⁵¹

Surely one main thing the painting of Marat was meant to do was make up for the disappointment in July. It would restore what had been missing. It would be imperishable. Instead of metaphor and stage business, it would be transparent to the facts.

We shall not get the measure of David's ambition for his *Marat*, in other words, unless we understand the depth of his commitment to literalness and

completeness in painting. He is still full of the idea in his presentation speech to the Convention on 24 Brumaire. "The people demanded its friend once more, its grief-stricken voice made itself heard, it provoked my art, it wanted to see its faithful friend's features again . . . I heard the voice of the people, I obeyed." Everywhere else in translating I have made *peuple* plural, as is usual in English, but in this case David's melodramatic singular goes to the heart of the matter. "Le peuple redemandoit son ami, sa voix désolée se faisait entendre, il provoquoit mon art, il voulait revoir les traits de son ami fidèle . . . J'ai entendu la voix du peuple, j'ai obéi."⁵²

Partly the stress on literal recreation here has to do with the fiction, which seems to drive David's whole proceeding, that what he has made is the people's image – asked for by them, addressed to them, of one of their number. "He met his death, this friend of yours, giving you his last morsel of bread; he died without even having enough money for his own funeral." "Come gather round, all of you! mothers, widows, orphans, downtrodden soldiers – all you he defended, to his own peril. Approach! and contemplate . . ." For pictures, in the people's eyes, are miracles, where what everyone thought was lost, or maybe just subject to time and fevers, comes back forever into the world. To call this illusionism seems to me to trivialize it. It is conjuration, necromancy, made possible by the force of collective will.

It would take us too far from our subject to discuss how much this view of painting's powers diverged from David's own. Obviously David was a bookish and elaborate painter, sometimes playful in a lugubrious sort of way. But I should say that even at his most grandly discursive – in the *Intervention of the*

13 Jacques-Louis David:
*Intervention of the
Sabine Women*, oil on
canvas, 385 × 522, 1799
(Musée du Louvre, Paris)



Sabine Women, for example (fig. 13) – what is most special about his art is the way the discursiveness coexists with such an all-or-nothing sense of the real. The great bodies lumber into narrative and symbolic position, finally, but as it were in spite of the weight of their illusionistic armor. It is this double-sidedness of David's pictorial imagination – the effort to signify so often at odds with the passion for embodiment – that is the clue to his work's inimitable pathos.

But of course the *Marat* is special. That is because the idea of complete and concrete rendering in art is subtended here by a specific politics of transparency. And therefore given a hectic (inaugural) force. Virtue was what stood up to the light of day. Vice – the very existence of which explained why the revolution, of all things, met with resistance – sought the shadows. All the revolutionary needed to do was lift high Diogenes's lamp. "In vain do you surround yourselves with shadows; I shall shine light into the inmost recesses of your heart, I shall uncover the secret springs of your conduct, and I shall stamp on your brow the hideous character of the passions that move you": this is David fighting for his life in May 1794, in a public indictment of his accusers.⁵³ I doubt there is a sentence in his writings that brings us closer to the heart of his aesthetic.

"Approach! and contemplate..." One orator at Marat's funeral in July had imagined Marat in turn opening his eyes and returning the people's gaze. "O man beloved of patriots... open your eyes to the light once again and see the sovereign who surrounds you [*ouvrez encore les yeux à la lumière et voyez le souverain qui l'entoure*]." ⁵⁴ I am reminded of the passage in Walter Benjamin where the characteristic of the work of art in the age before mechanical reproduction is said to be that it looked back at its spectators. Of course this illusion rested "on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man."⁵⁵ It was a quality of the work of art imagined by its users. Art as a practice still bore the marks of its beginnings in magic.

Maybe it is true that in the end these kinds of cultic investments in artworks were (or will be) destroyed, as Benjamin has it, by "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things closer spatially and humanly, which is just as fierce as their wish to overcome the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction."⁵⁶ Spatial and human closeness is insisted on with unique passion in David's painting of Marat. And that fact is bound up, you will gather, with the fiction of address to "contemporary masses." But nothing I have found suggests that this undermined the work's magical address – its ability to look back – to those who saw it in Year 2. If anything it reinforced it. Art's having to imagine that it was done for the people (Soboul's "Art was no longer reserved for a privileged minority") leads, at least initially, to a reinvention of its cult value – all the more urgently because the stakes were once again seen to be high. Art had come out (been dragged out) of the Palais du Fontainebleau. That did not mean it was ready to understand its place in the disenchantment of the world. The whole history of modernism could be written in terms of its coming, painfully, to such an understanding.

"Closeness," in the case of the *Marat*, is a specific form of what I have been calling contingency. Another modernist word for it is "immediacy." And one thing the picture of Marat demonstrates is that dwelling on these qualities does not necessarily mean that the work of art exits from the realm of magic. Any quality, however earthbound, is ripe for artistic transfiguration. In late Monet, immediacy takes on metaphysical depth. In most early twentieth-century art, contingency is fetishized as accident or arbitrariness, and invested with sinister

glamor. Modernism, as I say, is always part rearguard action against the truths it has stumbled on.

David's picture was done in two and a half months, in time left over from a political career.⁵⁷ I do not think it helps to call the picture "unfinished," for reasons I go on to explain, but obviously it was done at speed, and is full of the signs of a master technician economizing on means. A lot of Marat's body is worked straight out of the initial underpainting with a minimum of fuss. The hand that holds the quill pen, for example; most of the forearm above it; the chest and neck. Sometimes, looking at the picture, one even hankers after a bit more definition. The fingers and knuckles of the writing hand can strike one as perfunctory. (But maybe the perfunctoriness is a way of suggesting the fingers' letting the pen go, or hanging onto it automatically, at the moment of death. The same kind of maybe applies to Marat's knifewound. The fact that it adheres so imperfectly to his chest – its being brought closer spatially, to use Benjamin's phrase – seems to tally with the way more and more features of the painting are pulled forward onto the picture plane, lining up next to it or echoing its orientation. That is the painting's way of focusing and separating its main objects, thereby opening them to contemplation.) Even where the body emerges from shadow and is worked into something more definite – in the face, above all – it is less and less clear, the closer one looks, how the definiteness was done. The eyes especially are a baffling improvisation, with underdrawing and ground both recruited to the surface in the search for the final effect – of skin puffy and fragile, like a half-healed sore, dry and yet soft to the touch. (Marat's raging skin disease, which apparently would have put paid to him in a matter of months even if Charlotte Corday had not intervened, is condensed and displaced onto this one feature; and as a result made easier to look at. Though maybe the overall range of color that David used for Marat's skin – a grimy white, incandescent grays and browns, a tinge of green, even – is another way of hinting at the same condition.)

None of this adds up to unfinished, in my view. (For the time being let us leave aside the picture's empty upper half.) But the kind of finish the painting has – the hardness and clarity it insists on for the things that matter – was clearly often pulled off at the last minute. A great deal of chopping and changing went on, for instance, in and around the top edge of Marat's left forearm – the one resting on the improvised desktop – and the space just above it. It is the picture's crucial (polarized) opposition of light and dark. Contour and color were subject to what look like late alterations, maybe afterthoughts. There are dabs of a separate dark brown, close to the color of the empty background but quite distinct from it, put in along the line of the forearm so as to cancel a previous contour, which time has made visible again.

I am not saying these are great risks or unusual displays. Fixing a picture's light-dark fulcrum, for instance, is often done when work is almost over, when its place in the balance of tones can be seen for real. I just want it established that talking of sharpness and severity in the *Marat* – Jacobin qualities, which David worked hard to achieve – is not the same as pointing to clarity, still less straightforwardness, in technique.

"Give us back Marat whole." Naturally there were other painters besides David in Year 2 who responded to that request. And if we compare David's painting with its most peculiar rival, by a Toulousain named Joseph

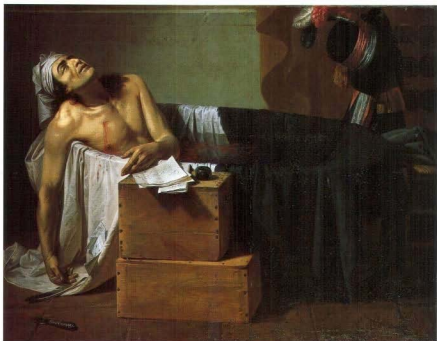
Roques (fig. 14) – it is safe to assume that Roques's painting derived from David's, but his treatment of the subject is different in all sorts of ways – then at least we shall get a clearer idea of what David took the request not to mean.

Roques, we could say, took Audouin's words at face value. Offering the body whole, for him, meant giving it a fair amount of space to occupy. It involved putting the viewer back a certain distance from the bath and orange boxes, having the pavement rake upwards in readable perspective, and the bath be seen from a high enough vantage point for its front and back sides, as well as the bloodstained water, to be clearly visible. (It is not that such things are simply absent in the David, but information about them is kept to a minimum.) Of course decorum, and maybe verisimilitude, decreed that much of a male body in a bath was going to be hidden. But what there is of it on show – almost exactly as much as in the David – is as true to death as a Tussaud's waxwork. The chest and ribcage catch the light, and the blood from the wound looks only half clotted. Roques's Marat is all skin and bones. His flesh is an oily gray. Over the collarbone it seems stretched almost to bursting. Mouth and jaw are set in something too much like rigor mortis. Black hair falls out of the turban. The chest has a nipple. Fingers are bony and prehensile. In a word, this body belongs (too much) to a possible world. It is too much undressed as opposed to naked. The cloak on the wall behind and the hat on the back of the chair – a swank Jacobin hat, with tricolor sash and feathers – are just the last straw. Even without them Marat would have had too much the look of someone surprised by death, and not given time to compose himself for it. Now might I do it pat . . .

None of this, as far as I can tell, is the result of some reservation on Roques's part about Marat and the revolution. His painting was presented on 16 Prairial to the Club des Jacobins in Toulouse, a gift from the *commissaire* Desbarreaux.¹⁸ Hard to imagine a more orthodox pedigree. But all the same, the features I have been pointing to put the subject at risk, I think. They miss the point of David's elisions.

In David's painting, Marat's body is maneuvered into a state of insubstantiality. This is not to say that the arms and torso, which are what we mainly see, are hidden or even made difficult to read. But they do not elicit the kind of scrutiny – repelled, but for that very reason fascinated – that we find ourselves giving the corpse in Roques. They do not detain the eye in the same way. This is partly because so much of the body in the David is kept in shadow, and one which in David's treatment of it seems to make Marat much the same substance – the same abstract material – as the empty space above him. The wound is as abstract as the flesh. And the blood coming out of it as impalpable as thread. (Of course the economy here is chilling.) Even these signs of violence would be enough to call the body back to its death throes had its arms and head not fallen into such strict, almost mathematical order. Never have horizontals and verticals been so settled. The laws of gravity have spoken once and for all. So that whatever might have been obtrusive and particular about the body – all the untidy specifics of its martyrdom, all Roques's dishevelment – is quietly set aside. A face put at ninety degrees to its normal orientation, and perfectly frontal, by that fact alone exists at an infinite distance from the world we know, where faces return our gaze. We do not look to it for emotions we can recognize. The face is further estranged by being miniaturized by the turban. (And why a turban, anyway?) Miniaturized, and robbed of the normal signs of masculinity. Fragile as an eggshell, but of course invulnerable. How touching the wisps of hair on the forehead! How heavy the eyelids and delicate the mouth! How accidental your kindest kiss.

Saint-Just blurts out a fear at one point in his *Esprit de la Révolution*, lest



"perhaps our children will blush at the effeminate pictures of their fathers [*nos enfants rougiront peut-être des tableaux effeminés de leurs pères*]." ⁵⁷ But he agrees that "the revolutionary is implacable toward the wicked, but he is a man of feeling . . . Marat was gentle in his own home, he terrified only traitors." ⁶⁰ The qualities here are hard to balance. Saint-Just's speeches are partly about that. But I cannot help feeling he would have thought the composure of David's revolutionary bought at the cost of making him too little a man.

14 Joseph Roques:
Death of Marat, oil on
canvas, 125 × 161, 1794
(Musée des Augustins,
Toulouse)

I remember talking on one occasion about the *Marat*, and someone's saying when I finished that I had gone on at length about everything in the picture except Marat himself – his dead body, his physical presence. It struck me at the time as a true observation, and somewhat crushing; and it was only later I realized that what I had left out, the picture in a sense left out too. The body is not there in the *Marat* in the same way as the other main objects David has gone to such pains to make real. It is left as a generality: a kind of scaffolding on which other particulars – attributes, writings, instruments of the passion – are hung. Or a machine to hold and display them. If it holds them properly they will bring the machine back to life.

Three times in his presentation speech David returned to the idea that what he had done in his picture was make Marat's features – his traits – visible again. "The people demanded its friend once more . . . it wanted to see its faithful

friend's features . . ." "May his vanquished enemies grow pale again seeing his disfigured features . . ." "As your eyes run across Marat's livid and blood-stained features, what you see will remind you of his virtues [*Vos regards, en parcourant les traits livides et ensanglantés de Marat, vous rappelleront ses vertus*] . . ." Obviously I am not pretending that blood and disfigurement are simply conjured out of sight in the picture. But I do think they are overshadowed by the play of other signs that catch the light more strongly, or reach forward into our physical and conceptual space. And given the depth of David's commitment to an aesthetic of bodily revelation, this should strike us as a problem. "In vain do you surround yourselves with shadows; I shall shine light into the innermost recesses of your heart."

It is not that I now aim to turn David's recommended procedure on him. God forbid. But I do want to know what it was in Marat that could not be written on or with the body, however much David may have wanted to (may have believed he was doing); but had instead to be given us literally to read.

On one level the answer is easy. It is implicit in the material presented so far about Marat's place in politics. Marat could not be made to embody the revolution because no one agreed about what the revolution was, least of all about whether Marat was its Jesus or its Lucifer. David's picture – this is what makes it inaugural of modernism – tries to ingest this disagreement, and make it part of a new cult object. David spells this out in his presentation speech. He knows he is making an image of Marat against many (maybe most) other images of Marat in circulation. The picture is addressed, somehow over the heads of that current imagery, to posterity or humanity. "Posterity, you will be his avenger . . . Humanity, you will say to those who called him bloodthirsty, that never did Marat, your darling child, give you cause to weep [*Postérité, tu le vengeras . . . Humanité, tu diras à ceux qui l'appeloient buveur de sang, que jamais ton enfant chéri, que jamais Marat, ne t'a fait verser des larmes*]." But of course the tears and accusation are there in the sentence that denies them. And David is fully aware of this, and of the special pressure it puts on picturing. "You, even you, I conjure up, execrable calumny [*Toi même, je t'évoque, exécration calomnie*] . . ." – one can almost hear David gasping at his own (necessary) daring. For how on earth will it be possible to secure an image of Marat's saintliness if one has to find form for his demonization at the same time – in the same canvas – and show the deadlock of truth and lie as now constitutive of Virtue?

This is what I meant before by talking of contingency entering the image, or of painting being forced to include the accident and tendentiousness of politics in its picture of the world – not just in the things it shows, but in its conception of what showing now is. The carrier of truth and lie in David's picture, needless to say, is writing. Isn't it always? But writing infects the picture's whole economy of illusion. That is what is new. Its procedures overtake those parts of the picture that are, or ought to be, unwritten and objective – empty, factual, unoccupied, material, merely and fully present – all of those words we have for the parts of a world where words seem like afterthoughts. Writing swallows up the figurative in general.

Item one, Charlotte Corday's letter. Written in a brave, square, super-legible hand. Two pages long. Well lit. The first thing we look at in detail (fig. 15).

"du 13 juillet, 1793." it says. (The revolutionary calendar would not start

until October.) "Marie anne Charlotte/Corday au citoyen/Marat." Addresser and addressee. The basic components or circumstances of the speech act. Then a bold line before the letter proper begins. The kind compositors call a dagger. "il suffit que je sois/bien Malheureuse [capital M]/pour avoir Droit [even more formal capital D]/à votre bienveillance." "It suffices that I am truly Unfortunate for me to have a Right to your benevolence."

Of course the letter, quite apart from its contents, is a tour de force of illusionism, calling to mind the scrap-of-paper signatures in Bellini or Zurbaran. Page two, just visible, is pure pathos, of the kind that still life painting specializes in. The shadow on the green baize cover is exquisite. Even the blood is like pollen or smoke. A gray, almost green, thumbnail holds onto *bienveillance* like grim death. The paper crackles under its pressure. I know of few moments in painting that so insist on the strange thing that writing is – childlike, formal, perfidious, entrancing. Marat's not letting go of it even in death seems the key to his vulnerability.

The phrases in the letter come, so contemporaries tell us, from one found on Charlotte Corday after her arrest. She had thought the better of using it to gain access to Marat, and instead wrote another offering to name counter-revolutionaries in her native city, Caen. That was guaranteed to do the trick. One sees why David opted for the alternative.

"Il suffit que je sois bien Malheureuse." The picture turns on a statement that is true propositionally – the picture as a whole is out to show its truth – but of course duplicitous in intent, considered as a performative. It is hard to know how close a reader David expected his viewer to be. Someone less trusting than Marat in 1793 might even have been put on guard by the fact of Charlotte Corday's using *votre* to address a singular *citoyen* – just at the moment when such matters were on revolutionaries' minds. "If *vous* is suitable for *Monsieur*, *toi* is suitable for *Citoyen*," to quote the *Chronique de Paris* in October 1792. "*Tu* is the language of truth, and *vous* the language of the compliment."⁶¹

I am not sure. Again, the problem is that sensitivities of this kind changed so fast in the course of 1793 that it is unclear if David would have thought he could play upon them. Certainly by the time he was finishing the Marat, the parts of speech were thoroughly politicized. On 10 Brumaire a deputation from the *sociétés populaires* came before the Convention to ask for *tutoiement* to be written into law. And the Convention agreed. *Tu* was henceforth the official form of the French language: the Committees of Public Safety and General Security were to use it in their acts and correspondence.⁶² There was even a move some weeks later to have spoken *vousvoyement* made a thing of the past. The Cité-Variétés theater cashed in on the issue of the moment with a play entitled *Le Vous et le toi*. The Théâtre National followed up with one called *La Plus Parfaite égalité; ou le tu et le toi*.⁶³

But the case is complicated. *Tutoiement* was a sans-culotte idea. Presumably the Convention's accepting it on 10 Brumaire was part of its general "giving ground but retaining control over events." Robespierre never seems to have used the second person singular from the rostrum. Thuriot put paid to the idea of altering spoken parlance with a sentence or two whose lofty sarcasm seems to me typical of Jacobinism – that is, of Jacobinism's other (most often hidden) side. "It goes without saying that *vous* is absurd, and that it is a grammatical error to speak to a single person as one would to two or several – but is it not also contrary to liberty for citizens to be told how they must express themselves? Speaking French badly is not a crime [*Ce n'est pas un crime de parler mal le français*]."⁶⁴

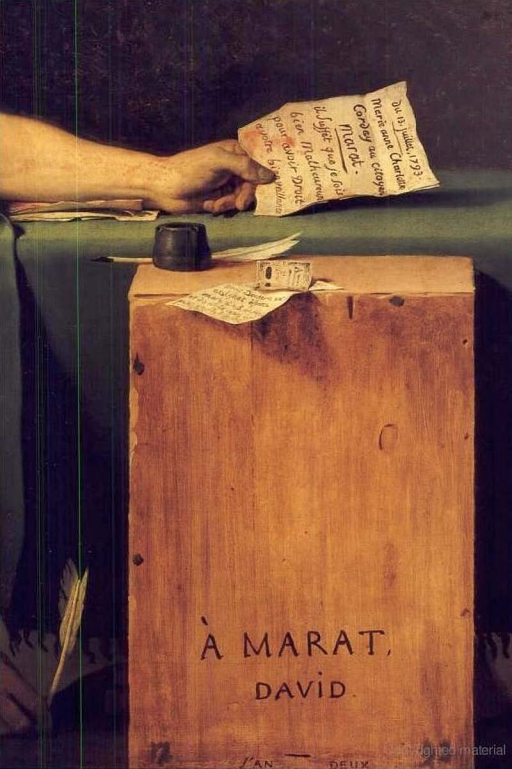
We shall probably never know how deeply ingrained in Corday's grammar untruth was meant to be. But it is certain her letter establishes truth and falsehood as what the picture mainly turns on. That is why the letter has to be so visually spellbinding. Once we are drawn to it, we are expected to think about where and how falsehood is visible. Corday's words are all true. It is what is in them, or behind them, that has to be rooted out – what may be hiding in their shadow. If you do not root it out soon enough you die. These are the tropes of the Convention in the summer, repeated ad nauseam in debate after debate. They are what eventually made Terror the order of the day.

The paradox of the revolutionary situation, as Furet has reminded us, is that the obsession with lying and hiding exactly did *not* lead to a distrust of language in general, or even to a sense of its practical limits. The worse one's opponents' linguistic perfidy, the more sure one became that language, once rid of their attentions, might still be the locus of good. Discourse swept the warring factions on. No one dreamt of a space outside it.

Marat is just as much a writer as Charlotte Corday. He still has pen in hand. Another pen is ready when that one wears out. His left forearm rests on a pile of paper. And there, if we look, are his last words, put at the point in the picture where closeness, again in Benjamin's sense, becomes positive crossover from the space of illusion to the space of the real: on top of the orange box, perched unstably on its forward edge, reaching out beyond the box's weatherbeaten face (which already seems, by the looks of its lower reaches, hard up against the picture plane), and casting a shadow upon it.

This letter is also legible, but only just. The eye has to strain for a reading, mainly because the whole thing is offered in acute foreshortening, and at a diagonal, but also because it seems to have been scratched out in a hurry, with none of Corday's deliberation. We cannot be sure who is addressing whom. The top half of the letter, long and thin, is hidden by another scrap of paper, and we pick up what is written on it seemingly in midflow – maybe not even at the start of a sentence. The first word – one hopes this time it is genuinely plural – is *vous*: "*vous Donnera* [or maybe *vous Donneriez*, which would be grammatically more comprehensible, even if the form of the word's final letter does not really fit the case; the capital D, by the way, is touchingly clumsy compared with Corday's] *cet/assignat à cette/mere de 5 enfans/et dont le mari est* [here things start to get difficult: the handwriting gets more perfunctory, as if the ink were running out, and the paper begins to curl slightly upwards]/*parti* [or is it *mort*?] ... *pour la deffense* ... [*pour la deffense* of what, precisely? ... *de la patrie*, maybe? ... *de la France*?]" "You will give this banknote," is one possible reading, "to this mother of five children whose husband is off defending the fatherland." But is there a final phrase at all? Of course there looks to be something; but it is so scrappy and vestigial, an extra few words where there really is no room left for anything, that the reader continually double-takes, as if reluctant to accept that writing, of all things, can decline to this state of utter visual elusiveness. Surely if I look again – look hard enough – the truth will out. For spatially, this is the picture's starting point. It is closeness incarnate. No reader or viewer is ever quite going to accept that it is also the point where eyesight fails.

No reader, and come to that, not many painters. When David had his studio do a second version of the *Marat* some time over the winter – we know it was done under David's supervision, and presumably meant to be an exact replica – what got tidied up was exactly this petering-out of Marat's writing. Everything on the piece of paper was opened just a little more to the viewer, partly because the paper was allowed to droop down a trifle lower from the lip of the



Du 13 juillet 1793.
Marianne Charlotte
Corday au citoyen
Marat.
il s'agit que je sois
bien Malheureux
pour avoir droit
à votre bienveillance

À MARAT,
DAVID.

L'AN — DEUX

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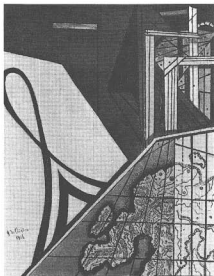
orange box. In particular, the last three words, *de la patrie*, are this time clear as day.

Who can blame the poor copyist? Something about the fact of the picture's most salient point being also its moment of illegibility is deeply counterintuitive. Especially in a picture so spare and sharp-focused – and when so much depends on the contrast of texts. So that we want the contrast to be cut and dried. We want to be literal readers. But here, where the picture offers us the figure of “grasping” as the very form of reading and understanding – grasping the text, and therefore surely the meaning too? – writing and illusionism suddenly turn on each other like a Möbius strip. Reading becomes viewing; but that kind of viewing (that determinant human activity) in which what we see is always already lost (but why do we say lost?) in what we know. Maybe David himself came not to appreciate what he had done here. Why set up a system of writing at all, if not to tie down what Marat must have meant? Is not that what writing (as opposed to picturing) is supposed to do? I can imagine him a month or so later, back in his role as teacher and administrator, telling Wicar or Serangeli – they seem to have been the pupils who did the job – to give the viewer *patrie* after all.⁶³

As for Roques, what gets left out of his version of David (as opposed to put in) is precisely writing. He puts Corday's letter in place of Marat's on the front edge of the orange box. Only now that front edge has been set back safely in the space of illusion. Roques certainly expects his viewers to thrill to the letter as illusionism. A few drops of bathwater have spilled on it from Marat's hand. Light is reflected off them. Their transparency is marvelously done. Only the first word of the letter – *Citoyen*, naturally – is legible. It is upside down. The rest is rendered in a confident generalization of how handwriting looks.

This is a painting of writing, in other words, as opposed to painted writing, which is what David's picture is struggling with. That is to say, Roques's paintmarks show off their own technical, visual difference from the sign-language they portray. Whereas the point of David's manipulations, as I see them, is that they enact the lack – or loss – of just such difference. Painted writing becomes the figure of the picture's whole imagining of the world and the new shape it is taking. There is a moment at which the descriptions “painted writing” and “written painting” seem largely interchangeable, and both appropriate to everything we see. The boundaries between the discursive and the visual are giving way, under some pressure the painter cannot quite put his finger on, though he gets close. Large questions occur, about seeing and understanding in general. Modernist questions. Is it (ever) possible to say what we are looking at, or see what we are saying? Are there parts of a world to which the judgements “true” or “false” – linguistic judgements, on the face of it – are not applicable? Do bodies (ever) do anything besides write, or hold up writings after they are dead? And so on. We shall find questions of this kind recurring all through the following two centuries, regularly generalized by an ominous “ever.” I think of El Lissitzky brooding on the words *Rosa Luxemburg* in 1920 (fig. 1). Or De Chirico's *Politics* of 1916 (fig. 16). The “ever” is regularly what gives modernism its flavor of madness.

Let me look one last time at Marat's and Corday's letters, and the contrast intended between them. Marat's letter was presumably dashed off to accompany the piece of paper money that holds it in place, and its purpose at least is clear. It describes, or recommends, the unfortunate widow to whom the



16 Giorgio de Chirico:
Politics, oil on canvas,
32.7 × 26, 1916 (Private
collection)

assignat should be given. (Could the widow even be Charlotte Corday, in her guise as *malheureuse*?)

Both letters, that is, pose the problem of politics and the people in 1793 in terms of benevolence. Marat's being a friend of the people is most vividly a matter of self-sacrifice. Bare room, orange-box desk, acts of charity. "He met his death, this friend of yours, giving you his last morsel of bread." This is part of what I see as David's strict Jacobin construction of Marat, and it gives us a clue to what the Jacobins conceived popular politics to consist of – what its proper discursive forms were, who were the actors and who the acted-upon. When David had originally promised to show Marat as he had found him, "writing his last thoughts for the safety of the people," he could not have known that those thoughts – or at least the last published version of them, in *Le Publiciste* on 14 July – were an attack on no less than the Committee of Public Safety. A double edit, then: of Corday's promise to swell the list of suspects, and of Marat's inveighing against "plotters on the committee of public safety whom I shall soon unmask."⁶⁶

This, if you like, is the picture's ideological ground-bass. I have been suggesting that the test of Marat's writing being truthful – truly benevolent – is its closeness and illegibility, its being offered to us as a thing among things. I have tried to show that the offer doubles back on itself in perplexing ways. In that, I think, the picture enacts the contingency of claims to truth and falsehood at the moment it was made. This is its modernism, so to speak. But we get the picture utterly wrong if we see it as accepting, let alone reveling in, these kinds of self-doubt. They are doubts foisted on it by the very urgency of its effort to guarantee truth, to show it inhering in the world. Marat's letter, the picture wants us to believe, is not writing at all – not like Charlotte Corday's patient

17 Caravaggio: *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, oil on canvas, 295 × 195, 1602 (San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome)



establishment of every grammatical coordinate – but a piece of the real which happens to be readable. And for that reason incompletely. We shall never be sure who says what to whom. The letter is an act. It begins in mid-sentence, so that we do not know – or need to know – whether its first *vous* is subject or object of the verb that follows. The sentence's voice is unfixed: in a sense it is hardly Marat's at all: it is the voice of benevolence, the genuinely plural voice of collective concerns and loyalties. Or so the illusion tries to persuade us.

Someone might object at this point that I have made out Marat's letter to be a more unusual object in the history of painting than in fact it is. For Western art since the Renaissance is full of such paradoxical moments, when an object seemingly escapes from the picture space to become part of ours. Sometimes the offer is made with a flourish, like the leg of the stool in Caravaggio's *Saint Matthew*, as if to confirm the whole picture's being larger and more unstable than life (fig. 17). Sometimes it is quiet. A knife or a cluster of grapes in a Chardin still life pokes out over the forward edge of the shelf on which objects rest (fig. 18). Again the front face of the shelf seems pressed right up to the picture plane. The painter's ability to set up a situation where objects come forward even beyond that notional boundary is meant, I take it, to lead us to think about the specialness of illusionism in general.

The last thing I am saying is that Marat's letter is wholly unlike these precedents, any more than Charlotte Corday's letter is wholly unlike Bellini and Zurbaran. But I do want to speak to the way it differs, ultimately. In Chardin and Caravaggio, as I see it, the picture sets up a series of transitions, from light to dark, from vegetable to mineral, from animate to inanimate, from focused to generalized, which is meant to reconcile the final, incidental excess of reality

with the painting's overall view of things. I think the opposite happens in David. The excess of reality, and the fact that the excess is writing, are only the strongest signs of a general uncertainty about what picturing now is.

Consider, above all, the weird disparity in the painting between its insistence on matter and its treatment of where matter is not. Of course Marat's letter partly possesses the force it does because it is one among a panoply of objects: the pens and inkwell, the patched sheet, the bone-handled knife, the bath, the orange box. The picture goes in for Marat's "things," as we know his devotees did in general. It insists on the specific forms matter took in this instance. And yet the single most extraordinary feature of the picture, I should say, is its whole upper half being empty. Or rather (here is what is unprecedented), not being empty, exactly, not being a satisfactory representation of nothing or nothing much – of an absence in which whatever the subject is has become present – but something more like a representation of painting, of painting as pure activity. Painting as material, therefore. Aimless. In the end detached from any one representational task. Bodily. Generating (monotonous) orders out of itself, or maybe out of ingrained habit. A kind of automatic writing.

This is one of those points – more and more of them will occur as this book goes on – where perception and interpretation of a painting turn on features that are specially difficult to put into words. The task is difficult not just because the effect is subtle, but because the subtlety is of a kind that is meant to leave it open to doubt whether what we are looking at is an effect at all. Much less an effect that puts the mechanics of picturing at risk. It is open to the viewer, that is to say, to see the upper half of the *Marat* as satisfactorily empty, or sufficiently like a wall. And equally, the visibility of the painter's personal handwriting here can be brought under a whole set of comfortable (normalizing) technical descriptions. What we see is scumbling. It is a kind of brilliant unfinish – maybe in this case more brittle and perfunctory than usual – with



18 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin: *Grapes and Pomegranates*, oil on canvas, 47 × 57, 1763 (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

which the better class of viewers in the eighteenth century would be perfectly at home.

I am being a bit dismissive in my presentation of these alternatives because in the end I think they avoid the visual issue. They offer ways not to look (of which art history is prodigal). But I am not denying they are alternatives. And the best I can do to persuade readers to take my readings seriously is just to go on insisting on the failure of language – other people's language, that is, normative and normalizing descriptions of these features as part of a world of objects and/or techniques – to come to terms with what we are looking at. Look at the scumbled wall, I say, as it occurs in rough proximity to the triumph of objecthood in Charlotte Corday's letter. Look at the distance traveled, in terms of the kind of attention invited to the business of illusion-making, between the grain on the surface closest to us – the face of the orange box – and that on the surface furthest away. And is "surface" the right word here? Is not the very metaphors of distance on which my sentence pivots – of distances traveled, between front and back, near and far, arm's length and stone's throw – itself a way of evading the upper half's placelessness? Its not being anywhere and not being made of anything. So that "grain" for its texture is about as far off beam as "furthest away" for its occupation of space.

All I am doing, I realize, is inventing different ways of saying: Trust me, the visual is a far weirder thing than language (and looking with language) will ever know. This is a topos of modernist criticism. Sometimes one thinks it is about all modernist writing on the visual arts has to say. And its tone is regularly mystagogic or worse. Lately it has come in for a lot of merited methodological flak. Therefore I do not like doing it. I know the bad company I am keeping. I do it (and shall do it again in what follows) because it seems to me true to the visual facts of the case. The modernist facts, that is. As to why modernism felt drawn to these particular areas of visual experience – ones where language has minimal purchase, where the understanding is regularly in doubt as to whether it has been offered anything, or enough, for the interpreting mind to work on – I hope some kind of answer to that question will emerge in what follows. As to whether art's coming to depend on its exploration of such areas was a good or bad thing, ditto.

I should try to offer a plausible account of David's intentions here – of what would have led him to leave the upper half of his picture empty in the first place. There is no great mystery to the set-up. The emptiness is of a room, perhaps a wall. (No hats and cloaks hung on this one.) It signifies Marat's austerity and self-denial. It makes him one of the people – it and the orange box and the patch on the sheet. As the eye moves right, the emptiness gradually becomes less dark and absolute. We know David was a great believer in the light of history.

This kind of account may be simple-minded, but I am sure it leads to the heart of David's beliefs and purposes, and of the revolution's. We would not need Furet to remind us that "in order to perceive the Revolution's deepest sources, one must grasp the most extraordinary and novel aspect of its nature, namely, the People's entry onto the stage of power."⁶⁷ This chapter's first twenty-five pages or so were essentially an effort to grasp that aspect again, as it might have affected David. And I mainly wanted to suggest that because it was so extraordinary and novel, it changed the circumstances of picturing for good. It is, in my view, the deepest cause of modernism; which is exactly not to say that modernism has usually recognized its cause. Why should it? It is enough, most of the time, if it represent effects.

The question of the People is a question about representation. The great nineteenth-century historians of the revolution, if we are to believe Furet, were great above all because they "attached central importance to the Revolution's symbolic investment in a new image of power." The People was that image. Edgar Quinet "understood that if the Revolution was a kind of annunciation [the Christian terminology chimes in with our object here] it was not because it was supposed to change society but because it was supposed to put the People in place of the King."⁶⁴ That is to say, it tried to put one kind of sovereign body in place of another. And the body had somehow to be represented without its either congealing into a new monarch or splitting into an array of vital functions, with only an instrumental reason to bind them together.

Hence, at a symbolic level, the careering toward direct democracy in 1793. (In my view, putting this kind of stress on symbolism does not necessarily conflict with a history which points to the Jacobins' calling the people on stage as actual, temporary allies in a class politics. Here as elsewhere, political contingency is the circumstance that symbolic actions strive to contain. "Contingency" is just a way of describing the fact that putting the People in place of the King cannot ultimately be done. The forms of the social outrun their various incarnations.) The Jacobins were the People represented. "In other words, a People unanimous by definition and therefore subject to constant self-purification, designed to eliminate enemies hidden within the body of the sovereign and thus to reestablish an imperiled unity."⁶⁵

From the point of view of those trying to represent it, that is, the body of the People was always sick. It needed some radical purging. And ultimately there was only one way to do this. It had to be killed in order to be represented, or represented in order to be killed. Either formulation will do. Marat is the figure of both.

Marat, I said before, had to be made to stand for the People. By now the enormity of the task should be clear: not just that Marat was such a disputed object, pulled to and fro by the play of factions (though this indeed is part of the problem), but that at a deeper level any body was inadequate to what had now to be done. Or any technique of representation. That representation was henceforth a technique was exactly the truth that had not to be recognized.

To put it another way. Marat had to be shown to be one of the people. This was difficult not only because his image might so easily be captured by other competing notions of People/poverty/popularity and so on, but because the Jacobin notion of these entities or qualities was empty. They were defined by pure discursive opposition, to the *riches*, the *aristocrates*, the idle and unproductive. And the categories themselves had better be kept free from empirical detail, lest the actual distinctions and tensions that existed within the people's ranks take on political form.

This is the framework in which David's instantiation of "People" in his picture's upper half might come to make sense. It embodies the concept's emptiness, so to speak. It happens upon representation as technique. It sets the seal on Marat's unsuitability for the work of incarnation. "Some parts of his body could not be uncovered, for you know he suffered from leprosy and his blood was inflamed."

I talked earlier on about the empty upper half's effect on the picture in general. I see it as putting paid to the viewer's last vestige of certainty as to the picture's representational logic. Now I can say what I mean by this.

David was committed to an aesthetic of completeness and realization, never more so than here. The job of the painter, in his opinion, was to conjure Marat back from the realm of the dead, and make his body and attributes present. I have been arguing that the offer of presence on which the picture turns is a piece of writing, reaching forward into our space. Reading and seeing are strangely conflated at this point, the one term consuming the other. But even this need not have been fatal, if only the picture had engineered an absence – of the kind Caravaggio and Chardin provide, in their different ways – as ground and foil to the world of things. Presence in painting, so the Western tradition seems to assume, is ultimately dependent on the painter's securing an opposite term for it: a place where representation can efface itself, because in it there is little or nothing to represent. A wall or void or absence of light. (These questions will come up again apropos of Cubism.)

Something that ought on the face of it to be such an absence looms large in the *Marat*. It fills half the canvas. But instead of guaranteeing the illusion by its simple negativity it turns out instead to be a positive of sorts; and not just another particular, like the unobtrusive wall in Chardin, but something abstract and unmotivated, which occupies a different conceptual space from the bodies below it. This produces, I think, a kind of representational deadlock, which is the true source of the *Marat*'s continuing hold on us. No painting ever believed in illusionism more fiercely. No objects were ever offered the viewer as beguilingly as Corday's and Marat's letters. But the objects are writing. And up above them, ironizing or overshadowing them, is another kind of script: the endless, meaningless objectivity produced by paint not quite finding its object, symbolic or otherwise, and therefore making do with its own procedures.

In a sense, then, I too am saying that the upper half is a display of technique. But display is too neutral a word: for the point I am making, ultimately, is that technique in modernism is a kind of shame: something that asserts itself as the truth of picturing, but always against picturing's best and most desperate efforts. It asserts itself where the picture most wants truth, and thinks truth can finally be materialized – imagined as part of a world. Modernists in the early twentieth century sometimes spoke of what they were doing as attempting "truth to materials." Perfect misrecognition. For "materials" in modernism are always the site of untruth, or the site where questions of truth and lie disappear into the black hole of practice. The fact that this happens in the David where "People" ought to appear, as a kind of aura or halo, is similar to its happening in Matisse, say, where "Pleasure" ought to be, as a kind of ground or immediacy to experience conjured up by the sheer force of color. As does happen, time after time.³⁰

There is, I think, one further small piece of the picture which might have the power to reconcile the warring parties. Up to now I have brushed it aside. I mean the scrap of paper whose tiny weight keeps Marat's letter eternally balanced on the edge of the orange box. It is an *assignat*, a piece of revolutionary paper money – writing which stands for property.

I have to say something, in consequence, about what the *assignat* was. Many of the issues concerning it are for experts, and leave me as far behind as they left most revolutionaries. Marat was notably bone-headed on the subject. But one or two things are clear. The *assignat* was a form of paper currency first issued in January 1790, partly in response to the flight of gold and coin which had

followed the storming of the Bastille.⁷¹ It only gradually became a mainstay of government finance. There was considerable scepticism about the whole idea of paper money, which was thought to be an English sort of thing. In theory the notes were guaranteed by land. Inscribed on each was the legend: "Mortgaged on the National Estates." That is to say, on the wealth generated from the sale of crown and church properties, and later from the lands and belongings of *émigrés*, *émigrés'* relatives, and foreigners. From a Jacobin point of view, this rootedness of the paper in the earth was an important ideological consolation. For they were no great believers in the *arbitraire du signe* in general, and in particular money made them nervous. Saint-Just can be found playing the role of Jeremiah in November 1792: "I no longer see anything in the State but misery, pride, and paper." The three were roughly equivalent, that is, but at least somewhere behind the banknotes was a memory, or promise, of Germinal and Fructidor.

In the end, in 1794 and 1795, the new form of money collapsed. The government was forced to conspire against its own currency – buying up the paper in secret and burning it, as a desperate hedge against inflation. But in 1793 that still lay in the future. No one would call the economic policy of Robespierre and co. exactly a success, but it did have one paradoxical result for a while: it managed to stabilize the value of its multiplying paper. This was no small feat for a nation at war. Between the fall of the king and the fall of Robespierre, the state put 11 billion livres' worth of new notes in circulation. 3.686 billion in 1793, 4.190 billion in the first months of 1794. Depreciation set in. By September 1793, the *assignat* was changing hands at fifty per cent of its face value. Many atrocious things followed when Terror was made the order of the day. But the value of the *assignat* actually rose, slowly – to sixty-five per cent of face value by Thermidor. The American ambassador in Paris wrote admiringly to Jefferson that the revolution had managed the "feat of a paper money which goes up in value while the amount of bills printed is actually increasing."⁷²

And how had they done it? By Terror, of course. By forcing the pace of expropriations, by seeking out and melting down hidden gold and metal coinage, by a general and ruthless *cours forcé*. David himself, in his capacity as member of the Committee of General Security (one of the two reliable Robespierrists on it before it was properly purged), was repeatedly involved in the detail of duress all through summer. His signatures survive to prove it.⁷³

Marat's *assignat* is densely coded, then. Of course I am not claiming it possesses the kind of visual weight that belongs to the other main objects in the scene. One might almost argue it is meant to be overlooked. But only in the way of Poe's Purloined Letter. And we know that some at least of the picture's first viewers did pick it up, and appreciate its signifying power. A writer in the *Feuille de Salut public*, for example, had this to say on 8 Brumaire (he was most likely reacting to the picture on display in David's studio):

The assignat for five livres which was all Marat possessed is placed by David on the block of wood represented next to the bathtub. This idea is really a stroke of genius, and an answer once and for all to those fools who accused the Friend of the people of being a pen for hire. In any case, who could have paid him what his pen was worth!⁷⁴

Not great criticism, but it does give a hint of the audience's viewing habits in Year 2. It confirms that one of the issues the picture was taken to turn on was

Marat's poverty. And that interpreters were able and willing to invest the smallest sign with meaning.

Wishing to be as tendentious a viewer as the one in the *Feuille de Salut public*, therefore, I shall take the *assignat* to sum up Marat's (and David's) world as follows. Those involved in making the revolution in 1793 believed profoundly that they were doing Nature's bidding. If human life could be rid of artifice, they thought, Virtue would reassert itself; because artifice was invariably the work of power. It was a set of ways to keep men (maybe even women) in subjection. Tyranny, fanaticism, custom, superstition, time immemorial: they were all names for the same spirit of misrule. Hence the utopianism of the revolution when it came to the symbolic order: the institution of the calendar, the dividing of the country into *départements* decreed by facts of geography as opposed to history, the rationalization of measurement (a meter being exactly one millionth of the distance between north and south poles), even the effort to alter grammar. And behind all this, the belief that power itself had been naturalized, in the form of the People's body.

Some of these moves look captious and thin. We have seen that the Jacobins themselves recoiled from them or their consequences on occasion – as with the war against *vousvoyement*. But the same verdict applies here as in the case of de-Christianization. Because the actions taken were often strained, and most of them did not stick, does not mean that the deepest meanings and functions of the revolution were not at stake. The revolution is anticipatory, of a history that is still far from ended. Its project is the disenchantment of the world.

This is the ultimate source of that desperation which seems to me most distinctive of Jacobinism as a political style – the blend of impatience, purity, and self-distrust. To believe in oneself as ushering in Nature's kingdom, and to think there was no time to lose if it was to be secured against its enemies; and yet to know in one's heart of hearts that what was being built was just another form of artifice, as wayward and unpredictable as the rest. Another arbitrariness. Another law for the lion and the ox.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all." This is the kind of conversation David must have got quite used to in the Committee of General Security. Let Alice be Saint-Just, and Humpty Dumpty Robespierre. Let "word" equal *assignat* – plus *malheureuse* and *bienveillance* and *droit* and *deffense* and *patrie*. And *People* scrawled in the paint above the lot of them, though unfortunately not quite legible. "There's a nice knock-down argument for you!"

The French Revolution was made by the bourgeoisie. By that I mean roughly what Burke meant at the time, when he said that "the moneyed men, merchants, principal tradesmen, and men of letters . . . are the chief actors in the French Revolution,"⁷³ though obviously I differ from Burke in thinking that the coming to power of such men was part of an irreversible change in the social and symbolic order. "Part of" is sufficient here. Not "caused by" or "expression of." I am not interested in a narrative of causes. All I want or need to do, for my present purpose, is insist on the oddity of the word "People" in a revolution of this social character.

An image will do better than a thousand words. There is a picture in Le Mans Museum that for years was thought to be by David himself, and that I think must have come from someone in his inner circle (fig. 19). It is rightly held to



19 Anonymous: *Family Portrait*, oil on canvas, 162 × 130, ca. 1795–1800 (Musée de Tessé, Le Mans)

be one of the most poignant documents to come down to us of the change that the revolution wrought in personal style. Nothing I can say will rob, or is meant to rob, the man in the center of the picture of his plain dignity. It is massive and touching. But for that very reason I think we should attend to the contrast between the father's careful symbolic *déshabillé* and the costumes of his sons and daughter, the china on the mantleshelf (one looks about for a terra-cotta Marat), the glimpse of picture-covered walls, the well-turned furniture, the spinet and the young girl's music lessons, the power to order this painting in the first place. These people and their painter are anonymous, as I say. But I take them to be representative of the political actors we have been looking at.

Compare, for example, the sans-culotte militant François-Pierre Beaudouin, president of the *comité révolutionnaire* of the Gravilliers section in winter Year 2 (we know about him from his will).⁷⁶ Master decorative painter, employing six skilled workers, in charge of the section's war production, and leaving behind at his death in 1795 a fine apartment on the rue Phélippeaux: several large rooms opening onto a terraced garden, a kitchen with two ovens, walnut cabinets, inlaid hardwood floors, copper plumbing, crystal chandeliers and goblets, settings in porcelain (terra-cotta Marats long since disposed of), tables of oak and marble. Remember that Beaudouin existed quite far down Jacobin ranks, and in a sense outside them. He was a "popular" leader. To quote the verdict of the historian who discovered him, a leadership comprised of men like Beaudouin "was bourgeois in its social aggregate, and absolutely by comparison with the population it ruled. It was so by its manufacturing and commercial capital, by its real properties and salaried incomes, by its skills in literacy, manipulation of ideological formulae, and governance. It had the power to command labor on a large scale and to create dependencies, allegiances, and constituencies."⁷⁷ These were the kinds of men who rang the changes on David's cry before the Convention: "I heard the voice of the people, I obeyed."

Of course the point is not to convict them of hypocrisy or even lack of self-knowledge. I for one am sure David was horribly sincere. It is to wonder what might have been involved for bourgeois individuals – what kinds of inventiveness, what sources of knowledge and ignorance – when they began to represent those whose labor they commanded.

Maybe I was wrong to back away at the start of this chapter from the idea of modernism's having begun at a particular moment. For ultimately I do believe it began with the French Revolution. This chapter has tried to show why. Of course modernism also ended with the revolution, and began again when the revolution began again, and so on. (The cycle continues.)

If I wanted to argue more fully for the 1790s and early 1800s being the decades that usher in a decisive new structuring of time, I think my best evidence would be music. Naturally, since this is the art that feeds most deeply on a culture's imagining of temporality – its sense of sequence and repetition, or of discontinuity and inauguration. Beethoven for me is David's brother. I imagine the *Sabines* dancing (better than Wagner did) to the last movement of the Seventh Symphony. And Marat agonizing to the closing bars of the Fifth.

"À MARAT," finally it reads on the orange box, "DAVID. L'AN DEUX." Dedication, signature, date. And even here language is not transparent. For what does the capital À mean, precisely? What kind of connection do it and the following comma intend between Marat and his image, or Marat and his

maker? For Marat, presumably. But also aspiring to Marat, reaching out to him physically. And in a sense *his*, belonging to him or done for him by proxy – as we might say, “le tableau à Marat.” And where are the words supposed to be spatially (illusionistically)? I wrote that they were “on the orange box.” I guess that is one interpretation. It is as Marx once had it, talking of the commodity: that maybe its power derived from us not being able to tell “where the commodity is.” This gets to be true of more things (more signs) in David’s picture the longer we look.

More, but not all. The *Marat* is not a picture that shows us shifts and uncertainties ending up swallowing the world, or making the concept “world” redundant. (It leaves that to later brands of modernism.) A pen is a pen, a knife is a knife. Goose feathers catch the light like this, and their vanes grow separate and sticky with use just so. Blood on a bone handle looks one way, on steel another, in water a third. Matter is stubborn, or at least predictable, and goes on resisting the work of modernity. Even the proud inscription “YEAR TWO” is provisional. The numbers 17 and 93 are still there to left and right of it, only half erased, seemingly stuck to the wood of the orange box, as if David had tried to make them vanish but been defeated by his own materials. Technique is a perfidious thing, says the painter, but at least a hedge against the future. The time of revolution is short. *Anno domini* will doubtless return.